

Introduction

Dementia is a brain disorder that seriously affects a person's ability to carry out daily activities. Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common form of dementia among older people. It involves the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language. Every day scientists learn more, but right now the causes of AD are still unknown, and there is no cure.

Scientists think that up to 4 million Americans suffer from AD. The disease usually begins after age 60, and risk goes up with age. While younger people also may get AD, it is much less common. About 3 percent of men and women ages 65 to 74 have AD, and nearly half of those age 85 and older may have the disease. It is important to note, however, that AD is **not** a normal part of aging.

AD is named after Dr. Alois Alzheimer, a German doctor. In 1906, Dr. Alzheimer noticed changes in the brain tissue of a woman who had died of an unusual mental illness.

He found abnormal clumps (now called amyloid plaques) and tangled bundles of fibers (now called neurofibrillary tangles). Today, these plaques and tangles in the brain are considered hallmarks of AD.

Scientists also have found other brain changes in people with AD. There is a loss of nerve cells in areas of the brain that are vital to memory and other mental abilities. There also are lower levels of chemicals in the brain that carry complex messages back and forth between nerve cells. AD may disrupt normal thinking and memory by blocking these messages between nerve cells.

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